

The Last, Best Thing
I Kings 17:8-16 and Mark 12:38-44
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Back in August, the Archives of General Psychiatry released a study noting that one in 10 Americans now take anti-depressants in the course of a year. That ratio makes anti-depressants the most prescribed type of medication in America. Perhaps more interesting, or more jarring, is the fact that the number of folks on anti-depressants doubled between 1996 and 2005, and increased every year between 2005 and 2008. One [journalist](#) posed the question, “Are we really so miserable?” before concluding that we may be in the midst of a new “Age of Anxiety” – like that experienced during the Cold War, when knowledge of the instability of the Arms Race led school kids to routinely practice “ducking and covering” under their desks, and Valium promised to deliver folks from their fear, or, at least, obliterate it for the time being.

Are we in the midst of an Age of Anxiety? Anxiety is a generalized fear, with no particular object or source. Now, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been scared this fall. And I wouldn’t call it anxiety, I’d call it fear, because this feeling has a pretty clear object, a pretty clear source. I’ve been scared of the flu, of H1N1, of anyone with a cough and a fever, of anyone who knows anyone with a cough and a fever, or, worst of all, of kids at daycare with coughs. I swear I have had to fight the urge to squint at the little darlings in the two year old classroom with deep suspicion on more than one occasion. Fear can make you a little crazy... I’ve been scared in these months for my father-in-law, who faces a host of respiratory issues, and for my sisters who are young and live very public lives, and my dad with his compromised immune system. But mostly, I’ve been scared for Fiona. And for me. As I readied to take her to stand in line at St. Charles North on a rainy afternoon to get her free, county-provided vaccine, I told anyone who asked, and a few who didn’t, that I was absolutely not prepared to lose my child to the flu. “This is not 1918,” I declared, “and I am not the woman my great-grandmother was.” I absolutely couldn’t take it. And so, as soon as I knew the vaccines were available, as soon as I knew where to get them, we were off in line.

It's a difficult thing to be afraid – to feel yourself slowly coming undone by fear. I spoke with a good friend of mine the other day, a wonderful clergywoman who also happens to be a new mother. She was remarkably brave during the course of her pregnancy – she went on a mission work trip to the wilds of Appalachia while 7 months in – and remarkably gracious in sharing her pregnancy with her congregation. But when her daughter was born with a slight fever, and had to be hospitalized for a few days, when my friend had to come home without her, something changed for her. She isn't nearly so ready to take this vulnerable new life out in public, out to church – because as much as there is the abundance of love in the congregation, there is also an abundance of germs. She knows, she's seen the prayer chain. I had never before heard my friend cry, and yet the waver in her voice, as she told me that she could not stand to send her child back to the hospital, was unmistakable.

I can't fault her the desire for precaution. I think she's being smart. Kids that little can't be vaccinated, so you protect them in other ways. Parents each have to make that call. But for me, what makes the fear so hard to bear is the twin knowledge that we – human beings – often do stupid, harmful, self-defeating things in the midst of it, and the knowledge that we, as people of faith, are called by the angels, and the prophets, and by Christ himself, to “be not afraid.”

There is certainly something to be said for an appropriate amount of fear in our lives. We want our kids to learn that the street is a dangerous place to play; I am continually reminding Fee that “cars cannot see little girls.” We want to wash our hands more frequently during flu season. Many of us aspire, motivated by our fear, to actually have a savings account that contains sums sufficient to cover our expenses for 2 to 6 months, like the financial gurus tell us, lest our fears of unemployment become reality. Fear is, often, an appropriate, biological response to things that our bigger, stronger, and less intelligible than we. Periodically we are told to “fear the Lord your God,” for that God is worthy of our awe. Our fear can signal that we know what's at stake, that we understand the magnitude of “the other.”

But how often have you heard folks justify decisions with a quick reference to “self-preservation” or our “fight-or-flight” mechanism? “It's what I had to do.” “It was him or me.” In workplace ethics, in personal relationships, in trying to somehow secure

the best opportunities for our kids, in fighting gun laws: we try to justify an awful lot based on the premise, the fear, that someone out there has it in for us, that there are bad guys out there who are just waiting to hurt us, that we have to protect ourselves at any cost.

I'm not immune to this, of course. My favorite, devastating story of my own childhood sinfulness arises from the fact that I was one of those kids that was terrified of monsters in the closet. I had nightmares, I could imagine them coming through the door – I would not watch anything even remotely scary for the knowledge that the images would surely revisit me in the solitary, terrifying darkness of bedtime. So, on nights when I was particularly scared, I would make my younger sister, four years my junior, come crawl into bed with me. She didn't mind – it's fun to share a bed with your big sister. But I recall that we usually fought about who would sleep on the outside, and I would usually win. I wanted her on the outside for a very simple reason – if the monster did show, he'd get her first.

It's awful, isn't it? I was a terrible big sister in this regard. I like to hope it wasn't always like that – I was better at being brave and loving and altruistic during the bright, life-giving, light of day. But what amazes me is that, at least in my memory, I didn't hesitate for an instant in sacrificing her for me.

I'd like to believe that we all grow out of this childhood selfishness, but there are a number of cultural roadblocks standing in our way. Take, for example, the assumptions of economics: that human beings are rational actors, and what makes them so, is the fact that they always act in their own self-interest. That's an assumption that is wildly pervasive, and underlies many of the laws and programs that structure our common life or undergird our national conversation.

I'll lay off the policy talk one of these days, wouldn't want you to get the impression that I'm a one-trick pony – but know that we do often act in our own self-interest, even when we don't really need to. It's just that economics thinks that's good, while Christianity tends to call that sin. So, here's an example: Sesame Street is celebrating its fortieth anniversary this week, and we are all excited about the impact it has had on our lives – teaching us, and our children, to read, to play and sing together, to think creatively, and to count, in English and in Spanish. Sesame Street, of course, is on

public television, and the Sesame Street corporation is a not-for-profit. They make the show as a public service. But it costs money. That's why you're asked to subscribe to public television. But most people who watch, don't. They use a service without paying for it. That's called a "free rider problem" – because the Sesame Street folks have to find some other way to pay for it. Similarly, a friend was telling me about a guy she knows who wasn't planning on having an H1N1 shot, because it's a new vaccine and he wasn't convinced it was entirely safe. That's his call, of course; everyone can decide for themselves – but he hoped everyone else would, so as to decrease the risk that he would get it. He wanted to sacrifice others for himself. It's a free rider problem of a different sort...

We know what's at stake in the question of how we will respond to our fear and our despair, to our anxiety: we saw this week a doctor, an army psychiatrist who found no way to overcome the ambivalence and stress he felt from work, from his overwhelming task of caring for those who return from war. He felt trapped, perhaps, and undone – and he responded with violence. Incredible, unjustifiable violence. Unjustifiable acts, but not incomprehensible. My aunt's first husband was an army psychiatrist during Vietnam and he despaired over all the boys who were given the option of jail or war. The disproportionately uneducated kids who were made to bear our nation's war-making tendencies. He despaired, and though he, thankfully, never picked up a gun, he did manage to destroy his marriage – not knowing how to cope with all that he was thinking and feeling. This week, we all mourn together for those who lost their lives, for those who were ready to sacrifice for our nation's security, but who should never have them taken from them by one of their own, by one who was commissioned to care for them.

We may nod our heads and understand the logic – though the flu shot and Sesame Street may make more sense than the week's events at Fort Hood. We have all certainly been willing to sacrifice the good of others for our own perceived gains at some point, in large and small ways – but our two Scripture lessons for the morning make plain before us that there is another way to live – and that, indeed, that is to live by faith in the Word of God. The widow of Zarephath knows that she and her son are about to die, knows that she is fighting a losing battle against starvation in an age of famine and drought. Given my fears this fall, I can only begin to imagine what she might be feeling. In the midst of

her grief and her anguish and her fear, all perfectly understandable, she is approached by Elijah, who wants her to give the last of what she has to him. He may not know it's the last of what he has – the Lord just sent him to look for a widow in Zarephath and ask her for food. But she explains her situation, and he assures her, if she acts in faith, she will not go hungry.

I'm compelled by this story for a number of reasons and I think we have something to learn from this widow who steps out in faith and gives her very last based on the promise of God – and lives. She knows she and her son are going to die. Once she has reconciled herself to that, what has she to lose? Will she die sooner or later? Might as well be generous, might as well trust God...

Perhaps this is part of the cause of our great anxiety – theologians and psychologists have certainly suggested as much: we aren't convinced that we really have to die. We think maybe, just maybe, if we play our cards right, if we are strategically self-interested, we won't have to. We can avoid it. We will be spared.

We know this isn't the case: just last week in worship we celebrated the lives of the saints: good, holy people who changed our lives and our world and then died. But we heard the Good News proclaimed as well: those who lived in faith, those whose lives evidenced the reliance on God, the sacrificing of self for others, day in and day out over a host of years: they are a part of the eternal life of God.

This is the life of faith – as evidenced by the two widows in our Scriptures today: the knowledge that our days on this earth are short, and may well be full of fear and suffering – but what we bring in response makes all the difference. Will we give a portion of who we are and what we have? Will we try to, on balance, not throw too many others under the bus for the sake of our own perceived well being? Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves what we stand to lose in this way of life, in one dominated by fear and despair? We may well lose our very participation in the eternal life – not because our gracious God will keep us from heaven – but because we will never experience the true freedom that comes from acting sacrificially, that comes from lives ordered first around love, compassion, and generosity. But what if, instead, the last thing we give, when we are backed against a wall, when we feel out of options, arises not from the worst of us, from our fear, but from the very best of us?

Will we, to our dying day, to our last two coins, with all that we are and all that we have, give our hearts to God, and seek to sacrifice for others? Will we hear the call of God? Will we live as saints and be remembered as such? Will we hear the promise of God? “Do not be afraid, for the Lord is with you.” Do not be afraid, death’s sting is swallowed up in the resurrection of Christ, and the eternal life of all. Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid. Amen.